Dreams, reality, and the price of dreaming

Reflections on Russia's troubled transition to democracy

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THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM IN THE SOVIET UNION and Eastern Europe engendered a wave of hope both in Europe and the world. There was a sense of relief that the Cold War was over and a tyrannous empire had collapsed. Yet, a decade on, although there have been many positive developments, the optimism has dissipated. Vision has met with reality. In Russia, in particular, the disillusionment is palpable. Already in the twentieth century, Russia had experimented with two political systems and found them wanting: the constitutional monarchy of 1905–1917 and Soviet communism. Now, the Russians are cynical about what democracy can offer. Why has this present dream of a democratic Russia proved so elusive?

A study of Russia's troubled road since 1985 suggests that dreams must evolve and mature or they will disappoint. The moral vision of the Soviet dissidents, which offered such a helpful diagnosis of totalitarian power, was not so evidently applicable to the problems of a pluralist society; Gorbachev's idea of a reformed communism was never adequately thought through and could not adapt to the crisis of 1990–1991; the democratic ideology of the 1990s, for all its successes, has had little to say to the underlying corruption and decadence in the country.

For a dream to mature in response to changing realities, the dreamer too must change. Anyone trying to realize a vision will themselves have to grow. All human beings, facing a time of transition, face blockages in their inner lives which threaten the process of growth. Dealing with these obstacles can be painful: it is impossible to avoid the agonies of shedding a skin. And what is true for the individual is also true for communities; as the Russian novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote: 'Human society cannot be exempted from the laws and demands which constitute the aim and meaning of individual human lives'.[1] When a

community or country tries to change itself, it discovers all sorts of hindrances and blockages that hold it back.

The moral vision of the Soviet dissidents

Much of the moral energy for reforming the Soviet system came from the Soviet dissidents: that body of intellectuals which from the 1960s onwards played an important part in undermining the moral authority of the state. Although their activities were political to the extent that to expose human rights' abuses meant to question the legitimacy of the state itself, most dissidents saw their activity in moral rather than political terms. There was a widespread feeling that the Soviet system undermined the integrity of those living in it: people were compelled to participate in a world of 'doublethink'. In this context, in 1974, Solzhenitsyn called on his compatriots to 'live not by lies' – to stop participating in the everyday lies which allowed the Soviet system to continue operating.[2] The dissident intellectual Andrei Amalrik suggested that the gaining of external political freedom might be the fruit of first gaining the quality of inner freedom: 'the freedom according to which the authorities can do much to a man but by which they are powerless to deprive him of his moral values'.[3] Truth, conscience, inner freedom: these were some of the key concepts of the dissident world-view. The vision of 'living in truth', to use Vaclav Havel's phrase, was typical of the dissident perspective.

This moral vision was hard won. It was the fruit of an inner spiritual endeavour, and as meditations on moral and spiritual survival, some of the dissident writings are classics. However, the vision was the fruit of an attempt to combat human evil, where the evil was clearly defined. To some extent an 'oppositional' siege mentality was created. However, with the collapse of communism, the struggle with the state, which had defined the thinking and lives of the dissidents, ceased to take centre stage. The lessons of living under communism could not immediately be applied in a free, pluralistic society. The dissidents knew how to deal with interrogations and political pressures: threats to their personal integrity. Yet their experience did not prepare them to speak with such authority about corruption and the mafia, and the decadence exported from the West. Furthermore, when it came to offering a positive programme for Russia as a whole, the dissidents had always been deeply divided: Solzhenitsyn, for example, was a Christian liberal conservative, who despised the Enlightenment, while Amalrik welcomed the values of the French Revolution. Whereas these men were one in

what they were against, they had little in common in what they wanted to replace it with.

Some of the old dissidents lament the camaraderie of the communist era. The purpose of life was clear then. Such people can easily be disillusioned. It can be argued that there are two essential interpretations of democracy: Joseph Schumpeter, in advocating what can be called 'formal democracy', suggests that democracy is a way in which competition within society is institutionalized and managed; Giovanni Sartori, on the other hand, sees democracy as an 'ethical-political system' – a set of values which a political system should try to implement.[4] Contemporary Russian politics accord more easily with Schumpeter's model than Sartori's; for those hungry for the kind of democratic ideal that Sartori describes, it is bound to disappoint. Those who hoped that democracy was some kind of 'end', can only be disappointed when they discover that in its everyday incarnation it is just a 'means'.

In a certain sense, the dissidents were prophets. They witnessed to the struggle between good and evil, truth and lies, and freedom and slavery in their own society, and some of their diagnosis remains as applicable to Russia after 1991 as it was before. At the same time, Russia has moved on, and the old truths need to be rediscovered in a new context.

Gorbachev's vision

Gorbachev and his circle of like-minded reformers also had a vision. Although there have been attempts to paint Gorbachev as a modern social democrat, in reality he was always a communist. His world-view was shaped by the Communist Party and the Soviet system, and his aim was to reform rather than abolish Soviet socialism. For the first few years, the world watched his performance with admiration. Almost single-handedly, it seemed, he humanized the 'evil empire'. However, Gorbachev's vision had definite flaws – a fact that was not so important when things were going well for him, but which became evident during the political and economic crisis of 1990–1991. Essentially, he wished to democratize the country, yet at the same time to keep the Party in power. It was only with great reluctance that in 1990 he conceded the principle of independent political parties, and he did so while at the same time introducing a presidential constitution which gave him dictatorial powers. Gorbachev did not want the idea of politicians being answerable to an electorate to apply to the Communist Party and to

himself. He wanted freedom, but with certain conditions; he wished to channel the tendencies which it unleashed in the direction of preserving the Soviet system. These two things were not compatible.

Gorbachev's lack of clarity meant that in the crisis of 1990–1991 he was taken over by events. He had shown himself a master at balancing conservative and reformist tendencies in the Party, and this had helped him to stay in power while at the same time introducing a radical programme. However, when he himself had to make a firm decision about the nature of the reforms he wanted to see, he was unable to do so. At the crucial moment, he was unable to redefine his vision. Presented towards the end of 1990 with the option to embrace a complete transition to a free market or a more reformed version of a centrally planned economy, he was unable to decide; faced with the question of whether to use force to hold the Soviet Union together, he dithered. At the crucial moment, his vision was exposed as unexamined. It had not been thought through. By August 1991, when the coup took place, it was the leaders of the Soviet republics, in particular the newly elected President of the Russian Republic, Boris Yeltsin, that were making the running. Gorbachev could not adapt to a situation in which his vision was no longer tenable.

A possible reason why Gorbachev's vision of reformed communism was so fallible was that his idealistic rhetoric covered up baser motives. The motive for the launch of *perestroika* was the realization that without substantial economic reform, the Soviet Union would not be able to preserve its military parity with the USA. However, early attempts at minor economic reforms led Gorbachev to launch the political reform process of the Party itself, in order to try and create a new élite which would be open to change. Democratic sentiments were thus to some degree a mask for great power ambitions.

Clearly, unrecognized ambitions sometimes lie at the heart of a noble vision. This is a point which is confirmed by the experience of Len Karpinsky, a journalist who took over the editorship of the liberal-minded newspaper *Moscow News* in the late 1980s. At the height of Gorbachev's popularity in 1988, when democratic reform was in the offing, Karpinsky was readmitted to Party membership after some years in the wilderness. He chose to rejoin the Party, he said later, in part because he believed that it was only through the Party itself that one could change the system. At the same time, he said, his motives were also selfish: he wanted to rebuild his career. Karpinsky concluded that careerism was the secret motive of many Communist Party members: their convictions were closely intertwined with their ambitions.[5] It is a

view which has much to commend it: the desire of party leaders to remain in power surely made it harder for them to examine their dreams with real honesty.

Russia's democratization process

The Soviet Union ceased to exist at the end of 1991. Yeltsin came to power in Russia as the head of a coalition of nationalist and democratic forces. For a moment, at the end of 1991, it was hard to distinguish these groups and ideas. It was only with the implementation of Gaidar's liberal economic programme after January 1992 that their differences became apparent. The liberal politicians and economists who led the first Yeltsin government had a coherent vision: to transform Russia's system of state planning into a liberal market economy as quickly as possible. Influenced by the 'shock therapy' policies which had been introduced in Poland in 1989–1991 and by western economists like Jeffrey Sachs, Russia's politicians introduced an ambitious programme of privatization. This aroused furious opposition, not only from old communists. Nationalists who had initially backed Yeltsin were concerned about the social costs of liberalization and the process of westernization.

In embryo, the institutions of Russia's new state existed prior to 1991. Yet, controversy over the programme of privatization and the overall direction of Russian policy led in late 1993 to a stand-off between Yeltsin and the Parliament. Yeltsin's victory led to the establishment of a new constitution, generally weighted in favour of the Presidency, but also containing a fair set of checks and balances.

Initially, the world looked on with hope at these developments; it seemed that Russia at last was becoming a safe member of the international community. There seemed to be a modicum of truth in the ideas of Francis Fukuyama, who argued that the Hegelian prophecy of the ultimate triumph of the liberal state was coming true.[6] Yet, eight years on from that momentous winter of 1991–1992, it is less clear that the transition to liberal democracy has been a success. Doubtless, the jury will be out on this issue for many decades to come: eight years is a very short time. At one level, momentous changes have taken place: a new political system has been introduced, and a new political culture is slowly emerging; there is now some evidence that the Russian economy is improving after its disastrous collapse in the early 1990s; Russia has a free media and Russians have got used to a free exchange of opinions on every issue. Yet, while at one level in Russia everything is different,

at another level little has changed: the institutions still cover up the reality of personalized rule by corrupt officials; the informal bribery and corruption which lubricated the Soviet system continue to flourish in the new era; the media is often just a channel for a decadent materialism which the population is relatively powerless to resist. It is not yet clear whether Russia is a vibrant country on the way up, or a corrupt one on the way down.

The hopes of the early 1990s need to be re-examined: once again a dream is under the microscope. This is a reflection on the West as much as on Russia. After all, the West to some extent imposed its own ideal on Russia. The liberal democratic dream has much to commend it; it is vastly preferable to the communist vision which preceded it. Yet, it is sufficient. There has been an unspoken assumption that the introduction of the relevant political institutions and economic mechanisms can create a free and stable society. Clearly, that is important, but it is apparently not enough.

Russia's culture of irresponsibility

It was never going to be easy. Systems can change quickly, but mentalities change much more slowly. Recent work on Soviet history has highlighted the way in which the Soviet Union produced a distinctive culture. People got used to framing their lives and experience in the right ideological jargon: they came to 'speak Bolshevik'.[7] If you knew and played by the 'rules of the game', you would flourish. The Stalinist system which to a large degree remained intact until 1988 produced a population of survivors: '*Homo Sovieticus* was a string-puller, an operator, a time-server, a freeloader, a mouther of slogans, and much more. But above all he was a survivor.'[8] In Orwellian language, people got used to lives of doublethink: 'conformity in public deeds, opposition in private views' was a norm.[9]

The Soviet system's habitual use of terror to gain its objectives was clearly an important factor in forming patterns of 'doublethink': people were afraid to say what they really felt. At the same time, the centrally planned economy also had a destructive moral effect. First, deprived of private property in any meaningful sense, people lost the discipline and responsibility which it brings; they lacked the personal incentive to work hard. Second, the absence of competition and the system of fixed prices led to a lack of accountability for poor-quality goods. What emerged was a deep-seated culture of cynicism and irresponsibility. Visitors to the Soviet Union were often amazed by the contrast between

the cared-for feel of private apartments and the slovenly appearance of state-owned property. Deprived of incentives to work honestly for the state, people had no compunction about stealing from it. This kind of separation between the public and the private resulted in a fragmentation of conscience: people had a sense of moral obligation towards their friends and the networks they were part of, but little such sense about public property or affairs.

These things cannot be wished away. The formation of conscience is a long-term matter. Unfortunately, Russia's race to democracy has not been unlike the Bolshevik race to communism. Both revolutions have shared an assumption that once the system had been sorted out, people would become good. This is a utopian view of the world, owing much to the Enlightenment idea that human nature is plastic and can be moulded by politics. It is not so simple. The greatest threat to Russia's democracy is this long-term and deep-seated fragmentation of conscience. It affects the politicians as well as the population. After all, the élites are the product of the same culture as those they serve. Indeed, the corruption that has accompanied the process of democratization is in part a fruit of the fact that those who have led it are themselves 'survivors' who are inclined to allow their own interests to take precedence over the public good. In this sense, Russia's democratic visionaries, like Gorbachev before them, are hindered by things which exist inside themselves.

Facing the past

This culture of irresponsibility has a profound impact on the way in which people perceive the Soviet past. There is little evidence in Russia of a widespread repentance for the crimes of the Soviet era. Where wrongs were done, Russians are likely to say 'mistakes were made'. Indeed, it has been argued that 'one of the spiritual crimes of communism was that it wholly replaced the concepts of "sin" and "vice" with the concepts of "mistakes" and "deficiencies"'.[10] In part, this is a legacy of the Soviet ideological emphasis on historical necessity and class war rather than personal responsibility.

The problem with repentance is that it is very difficult to make generalizations about who was guilty or not. Attempts were made in late 1991 to encourage some kind of trial of communism akin to the Nuremberg process, but they came to nothing. Understandably perhaps, Russia's leadership was nervous of the divisive effects of such a process. Indeed, most of Russia's democrats had themselves been Party

members. Nevertheless, it is not easy or helpful to sweep the past under the carpet. Germany after World War II and South Africa after apartheid are examples of countries where an honest and open attempt to evaluate the past has been useful.

Without an honest reckoning with the past, it is hard to break the old patterns of thinking. That can be seen today in the way that the Russians are conducting the Chechen war. The issue of Chechen separatism is in itself a complex one, and there are no easy solutions. However, in Russia's strategy of dealing with the problem, there is a recurrence of past destructive patterns of behaviour. The lack of genuine concern for refugees or civilians has long-term historical roots. The Russian empire was the fruit of military conquest: so also was the Soviet Union. In addition, however, Lenin and particularly Stalin established a pattern of using terror to deal with problems. During the Second World War, Stalin ordered the deportations of a number of the Caucasian peoples, including the Chechens, fearing their potential sympathy for the Germans. Now in the 1990s, Russia is having to face the consequences of its long-term ill-treatment of the Chechens. In doing so, it continually resorts to the old methods: it knows of no other. Habits of mind have been created which are very hard to break.

The underlying problem is that the Russians are still secretly attached to an old vision: the idea of a powerful Russian state. For centuries, the state took precedence over the individual. In dealing with the crisis in Chechnya, democratic impulses contend with the pull of an old imperialist dream. Just as, in the life of an individual, a time of transition brings to the surface old temptations and unhealed fears, so also in the life of a nation. Russia's war in Chechnya brings to the surface the fear of losing an identity. The transition to democracy offers Russia the chance to develop a new identity as a responsible member of the international community. But the transition to that identity is full of risks, and while it is going badly, the old dream can appear particularly attractive. This relates to what psychologists call the problem of 'transference': the inappropriate attempt to transfer a map of life learned in childhood into the adult environment. 'Transference', it seems, can be a problem for nations as well as individuals.[11]

How can old patterns of behaviour be broken? Solzhenitsyn, who for all his nationalism, has always been an advocate of a liberal rather than a chauvinistic patriotism, wrote of the need for 'repentance and self-limitation in the life of nations'.[12] Without repentance for the past, without a wider break with the idea that deportations and executions were not just mistakes, but the fruit of real evil, Russia will always risk

going back to that old dream. The old dream is a temptation, a comfort zone, that can protect the conscience against a true reckoning of things.

It is important to understand the way in which unresolved fears can condition the reactions of a country. Russia's response to the Kosovo crisis is an example of this. The NATO bombings of Serbia caused an extraordinary outburst of anti-western feeling. Some of the criticism of the West was very perceptive, but much of the reaction was ill-informed, and could be understood as not having a direct relation to the Kosovo crisis at all. Democrats were afraid that the NATO action would lead to an increase in support for the communists; ordinary people were afraid that NATO might attack Russia next; communists and nationalists lamented the decline in Russia's international influence. The crisis thus brought to the surface some of the fears and blockages that are at work in Russia's body politic as the country attempts to move towards democracy.

Some dreams are flawed because they are really an escape. Russia's secret desire to remain a superpower distracts the country from taking an honest look at her past. The value of repentance is that it brings with it a breakthrough of reality, and it makes the discovery of a new and better identity, indeed a better dream, possible.

Spiritual dimensions of society

The importance of 'repentance' for the political health of a country suggests that Christian concepts can helpfully be applied in the secular world. This is becoming widely recognized, even outside religious circles. Hannah Arendt, observing that the discovery of the role of forgiveness in human affairs was made by Jesus, declared: 'The fact that he made this discovery in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less rigorously in a strictly secular sense'.[13] What further insights, then, can Christianity bring to Russia's chapter of broken dreams?

With hindsight, it is clear that Russian and western democrats have been naïve about the scale of the challenge facing post-Soviet Russia. The liberal world-view, which has dominated contemporary western thought, interprets history in terms of the march of human freedom. Yet Russia's experience indicates that progress towards freedom is not guaranteed. There is something in human beings which pulls them back. In Russia's case there is a continual temptation to embrace either old securities or a new decadence, rather than solidly to move forward. Here, it seems, liberal and democratic principles need to be under-

pinned by religious values if they are to maintain themselves. Otherwise, the walk to freedom can be sabotaged by primitive instincts and the will to power.

It is hard for people to rise above the superficialities of their own age. It is clear, for example, that Russia's modern dreams reflect the particular debates of their time, and the weaknesses in those dreams often simply reflect the limited nature of those debates. At the same time, there is an intimate connection between the dreams people have and the characters of the dreamers themselves. Russia's politicians, for example, are often hindered from gaining a truer picture of things by factors inside themselves: accepted half-truths and secret ambitions. It is here that religion has something crucial to offer. Christianity, for example, seeks to set up an absolute standard to measure things against. It offers a mirror against which half-truths and false motives are clearly revealed. It is true, of course, that the contemporary representatives of Christianity are themselves products of their time: indeed, one of the tragedies of modern Russian history is that the Russian Orthodox Church has itself been corrupted by Soviet power, and has thus been unable to present a clear mirror to society. Yet, even then, the mirror that the Church offers reflects the experience of believers over the centuries – a fact that in itself overcomes some of the limitations of the time.

Religion, however, is not just a mirror. It witnesses to a power which makes things different. People are not condemned to recycle continually the flaws in their own characters or in their wider environment. The Spirit of God makes possible a new motivation. Cardinal Newman suggested that although faith is an intellectual act, 'it takes its character from the moral state of the agent'.[14] The link he thus makes between character and spiritual sight has important implications for dreamers. The Spirit of God, in morally and spiritually renewing a person's mind, can bring a human dream into sharper focus, and makes its evolution into a more refined and true dream possible. It is this that can make a person rise above their time, and can produce a religiously inspired statesmanship.

Some dreamers are frustrated with the world and their outlook reflects their impatience. The Russian philosopher and theologian Sergei Bulgakov wrote in 1909 of the 'maximalist' expectations of the revolutionary intelligentsia: 'Consciously or unconsciously the intelligentsia lives in an atmosphere of expectation of a social miracle, of a universal cataclysm, in an eschatological frame of mind'.[15] It was a prophetic comment. The Bolsheviks were impatient with reality, and

consequently used violence as a way of dealing with obstacles. Such an impatience with the world is also typical of some of Russia's contemporary democrats. They want the world to change overnight. A religious view of human nature, which embraces its complexity and its capacity for both good and evil, is a good antidote to this tradition of utopianism. To abandon utopianism does not mean to abandon dreaming altogether. It simply leads to the liberating recognition that although human society can be significantly improved, it is not perfectible this side of the grave.[16]

Perhaps all human dreams, however, are destined to be superseded. The frustration that many feel when their dreams come to naught is in part a frustration at coming to terms with the fact that, as human beings, we cannot ultimately control our own destiny. The secret temptation is to attempt to impose a dream or a vision on others. Our final step in growing up is surely to recognize that there is a higher purpose at work in the world.

In this context, broken dreams can be interpreted as a gift of providence. They point to the need to deepen the aim of one's life's work. Russia's broken dreams can be understood in this light: they point to the country's need to discover or rediscover a greater vision. It would be a great step for the naïve liberalism that dominates modern Russia to discover the existence of a higher purpose. It would be the mirror against which her poorer dreams would be exposed, it would be a guard against disappointment, and it would make it harder for Russia herself to drift backwards towards an older vision of the country as a great military power, or to give way to the decadence of modern materialism.

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NOTES

1 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, 'Repentance and self-limitation in the life of nations' in A. Solzhenitsyn *et al.*, *From under the rubble*, trans under the direction of M. Scammell (Fontana/Collins, 1976), p 106.

2 See Alexander Solzhenitsyn, 'Zhit' ne po lzhi', *Publitsistika* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1981), pp 168–172.

3 Andrei Amalrik, 'An open letter to Kuznetsov' in *Will the Soviet Union survive until 1984?* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1981), p 65.

4 See Richard Sakwa (University of Kent), 'Is Russia a democracy?', unpublished paper, 1999.
5 See Philip Boobbyer, 'The moral lessons of Soviet history: the experience of opposition to evil', *Religion, State and Society* vol 21, nos 3 and 4 (1993), p 360.
6 See Francis Fukuyama, *The end of history and the last man* (Penguin, 1992).
7 Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic mountain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp 216–220.
8 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p 227.
9 Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Soviet intellectuals and political power* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1990), p 80.
10 Boobbyer, 'Moral lessons of Soviet history', p 357.
11 M. Scott Peck, *The road less travelled* (London: Arrow Books, 1990), p 52; for a religious analysis of blockages to spiritual development, see David Lonsdale, *The art of discernment* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1992), p 114ff.
12 See Solzhenitsyn, 'Repentance and self-limitation in the life of nations', pp 105–143.
13 Hannah Arendt, *The human condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), p 238.
14 Ian Ker, *Newman* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p 262.
15 Sergei Bulgakov, 'Heroism and asceticism' in *Landmarks*, trans M. Schwarz (New York: Karz Howard, 1977), p 39.
16 For a religious critique of utopianism by a Russian philosopher, see S. L. Frank, *The light shineth in darkness*, trans Boris Jakim (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1989), esp. pp 166–171.